

## ANIMALS - OSPREY

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### Four Osprey Chicks!!!

By CHRIS PECK

Four osprey chicks — a rare event — have hatched on top of one of the 5 poles set up in Duxbury to help the survival of the once endangered fish hawks.

An agent for the Massachusetts Audubon Society was able to attach a metal identification band just above the sharp talons of 3 of the young birds but watched helplessly as the 4th took flight from the nest. Another fledgling tried to leave but was grabbed after landing in the tall marsh grass.

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## OSPREY CHICKS

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Norman Smith, director of the Trailside Museum in Milton, and one of about 3 people licensed in the state to tag raptors, including owls, said that last week was the first time in almost 20 years of banding ospreys that he has discovered 4 chicks in one nest.

The typical nest has 2 or 3 birds and often they do not survive. After carefully holding these 7-week-old chicks, measuring about 12 to 18 inches with wing spans of 5 feet, Smith pushed an index finger beneath the chest feathers.

"They look thin," he said, "But you can imagine when you have 4 youngsters looking for food. That's a lot to feed."

These quads fared better than their neighbors. Their nest is referred to as the Town Line pole, located in the marsh of Duxbury Bay lying between Marshfield and Duxbury. It can be spotted from land off of Colby Hewitt Drive.

Nearby, the Scat Island pole — both reached by boat in Duxbury — held in its nest the remains of at least one chick that had hatched and been eaten, according to Smith.

As he picked through the small, brown feathers he had removed from the mesh of sticks on the 15-foot-high platform, Smith said, "Somebody has been using this as a feeding perch."

He guessed a great horned owl or a peregrine falcon had swooped down into the osprey nest and helped himself to a feast. The platform nests are often set out in the open, away from trees to avoid predators, but it doesn't always work.

Ospreys are called fish hawks because they dine exclusively on fish. The males and females hunt for food by hovering over the water, diving in feet first and carrying their prey in their talons. During nesting, the male hunts to feed the female and chicks.

The birds build the nests out of large sticks but also add an assortment of fishing line, rope, shopping bags, and socks. One year, Smith was able to free a chick entangled in fishing line in the nest during the banding. The nests are huge, ranging from 2 to 6 feet in height and can be more than 6 feet in width.

Duxbury Conservation Administrator Joe Grady said he used to help build the nest after setting up the platforms and poles until he found the birds prefer to do the job on their own.

"We used to put a few sticks just to get them started and then we were told they like building the nest themselves, that is part of their courtship," he said.

Terri Nickerson, a tax accountant from Duxbury and an Audubon Society volunteer, keeps an eye on half of the 15 nesting sites in the South Shore. Her area includes Duxbury, Marshfield, and Plymouth.

She begins observing the nests through binoculars from land by the last week in March awaiting the birds' return in April and May from their southern migration.

Besides the Town Line and Scat Island poles, she watches the ones at North Hill Marsh and Blue Fish River, in Duxbury; 2 at Saquish and Gurnet in Plymouth; and one in Marshfield at Ivy Island.

Nickerson spotted some early signs of success, the female sitting low in the nest at the Ivy Island pole, but then it ended. Nickerson later found 2 eggs at the bottom of the pole, under water.

The Scat Island pole traditionally is the most productive site and it was the first pole put up by Grady when he began his involvement, then with the town's Department of Natural Resources 14 years ago. He used

wooden posts from the decking of the previous wooden bridge crossing to Duxbury Beach, which burned and was later replaced.

At that time, Grady notes, the birds were on the endangered species list and the state helped with erecting platform nests.

Ospreys had been victims of DDT which had thinned the shells of their offspring so that the eggs could not support the nesting adult. With the banning of DDT, the birds were not completely safe. Overbuilding has destroyed many of the tall trees where they had built their nests.

Tall poles with platforms able to hold the unwieldy jumble of sticks began sprouting along the coastline and the birds' numbers increased. Now that the osprey has been removed from the endangered list, much of the monitoring is left to the Audubon Society and volunteers.

Nickerson says the yearly Duxbury banding of osprey chicks is done to learn more about the migratory habits of the birds and their behavior. Studies have found the ospreys who travel north to Massachusetts in the summer will fly as far as South America in August and September. The adults leave first, without their young, according to Nickerson.

About 25 birds have been born in the South Shore, she says, in the past 4 years since she began keeping track. And she suspects many return to start a family but she has no proof.

Scientists believe, according to Nickerson, that the young birds return to within 20 miles of where they were born when it comes time to mate. She said Smith is exploring the use of easily identified colored bands — instead of the silver metal ones currently used — to mark the osprey found in the nests in hopes of identifying them as adults in following years.

Now, the adult birds circle high overhead when the chicks are carried upside down by their ankles for banding. Although the adult birds complain in a staccato-like high pitched squawk, they don't attack.

The metal bands contain identification numbers and the address of the agency to contact if a bird wearing the band is found. Colored bands could perhaps be spotted with binoculars on the adult ospreys flying overhead.

"Until we actually have some proof that some of these are our young birds we don't actually know. But we feel some of them have to be," according to Nickerson.

The group also traveled to Weymouth and Hull last week where they found 4 more chicks. Three were hatched at the Weymouth pole, one flew away before being tagged, and one was found and tagged at the Hull pole.

The Hull platform had been erected courtesy of Hull Electric Co., Nickerson said, next to a utility pole that the ospreys had taken over for a nest that was causing power outages. The utility company provided Smith with a free ride on board one of its cherry pickers to take the only chick in the new nest.

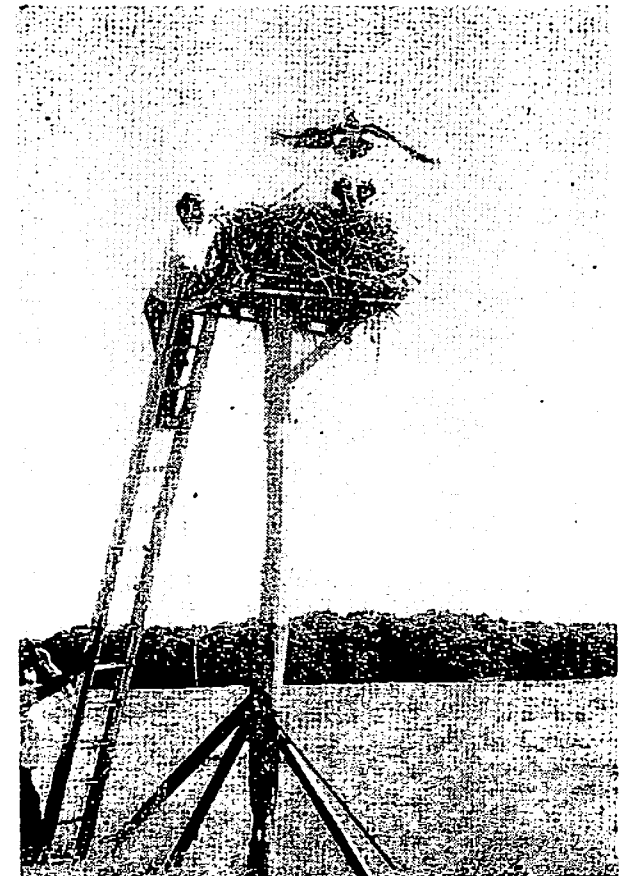
## Step By Step Osprey Banding



Norman Smith of the Massachusetts Audubon Society, climbs toward nest of osprey chicks to band them with identification numbers.



One of the young birds has flown off as Smith approaches and another is inching toward the edge of the nest.



A second osprey flies from the platform nest at the Town Line pole as Smith reaches the top. He realizes the nest held 4 hatched chicks, a large number and rare event for ospreys.

*Photos by Chris Peck*



**Terri Nickerson, an Audubon volunteer, retrieves the second bird which landed in the tall marsh grass and was unable to fly further.**



**Norman Smith attaches metal band to the ankle of an osprey chick which is about 7 weeks old and almost the size of an adult bird.**



**Norman Smith holds the banded bird whose migratory habits hopefully can be traced.**



Shannon Brown, who joined the expedition as part of a school science project, watches the rare bird along with Conservation Administrator Joe Grady.



Joe Grady, who built the nesting platforms in Duxbury, notes the birds are no longer endangered and that many chicks have hatched successfully from these nests.